



Diversity Awareness: "Knock Down the Fences"

By John Robinson, III, CRCM, CFE

What Is Diversity?

Respecting the physical and cultural differences of individuals and groups with different religions, education, politics, lifestyles, age, family status, national origin, regional background, profession, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, persons with disability, values and beliefs.

Imagine for a moment that you want to have a large party with all your friends and the neighbors that live around you. You don't know if they all know each other, but you know all the guests. Your neighborhood is made up of houses that are surrounded-and separated-by chain-link metal fences and you wonder how you can get everyone together in your backyard. Your idea?... Knock down the fences!

This is really the same concept with diversity awareness. Diversity awareness is knowing that varied influences exist in your communities (neighborhood). People may differ by appearance, education, gender, ethnicity, language, marital status, race, sexual orientation, values and socioeconomic status. Being aware of these differences is not enough. We must create an environment that effectively capitalizes on the understandings of diversity as it relates to financial issues.

At first this may seem a little overwhelming considering how to incorporate everyone, since we all come to the business table with our own values, cultures and upbringings. For any team to be great they must feel valued as a team member and we as individuals must value their culture, skills and know they can contribute to the overall success of the team objective. We need to ensure that an atmosphere of inclusiveness is present in the workplace and we don't single out or stereotype individuals for any reason.

It's through the lack of diversity awareness education and practice that you allow forms of discrimination on to the business table and this hurts the overall productivity and morale of the team members. Discrimination in any form can impact your financial institution in several ways:

- First, discrimination may mean missed business opportunities.
- Second, discrimination is of major concern to the general public and most recently targeted by state and federal agencies.

- Third, eliminating diversity discrimination keeps institutions from being targeted by local activist groups, regulatory agencies and out of the courts for illegal hiring and employee matters.

Today, your financial business success and growth depends on your non-financial interest, such as business ethics/governance, corporate contributions, your community involvement and workplace advantages.

Here are some points to consider when trying to understand diversity not only in your workplace, but in your everyday life:

Issues to Consider

- Am I acting in a way that shows I acknowledge and respect differences?
- Am I communicating openly and clearly?
- Is it possible that my words or actions are being misinterpreted?
- Are my assumptions creating barriers?

Enhancing Your Multicultural Skills

- Expect multicultural misunderstandings to sometimes occur
- Learn about cultural styles and values of different groups; understand and appreciate individual & group differences;
- Don't generalize about individuals just because of their particular culture; many individual differences exist within groups;
- Avoid hot buttons or blunders such as ethnic jokes, sexualized expressions, racially based assumptions, inappropriate touching, stereotyped job assignments and causing public humiliation; and
- Consciously seek out new multicultural relationships and challenges.

The Board Initiative on Diversity

Most boards are made up by social networks or from other boards whose members each serves on. Boards are generally persons that the CEO is "comfortable" with, knows in some capacity. The initiative on diversity should be expanded to the board level in terms of bringing on minorities and women where there aren't any. This may seem simple, but I can image how difficult it may be to get new and different board members elected. The more "like-minded" a legal board is, the more likely its members will be to "stay in line"—less likely to challenge senior management. Directors from different backgrounds, in terms of profession, gender, race, are more likely to ask in-depth questions than the CEO's friends and industry peers are.

You'd be amazed what talent and potential growth would be possible if CEOs and stakeholders elected members from their larger community. Your entire organization would gain if your institution started at the top with engaging diversity.

To really get your institution out in the forefront of community mindedness, start a monthly or quarterly "brown-bag series" that features speakers, dancers, artists that depict the cultural makeup of your community. Really stretch and have your bank sponsor a community wide task force of local business professionals that are committed to improving and educating the community on diversity. This task force would be charged with developing programs that promote all the various cultures in your community. Work with other local task force groups to promote positive media coverage.

The Lenders View of Diversity

It has always amazed me that over the last 12 years that I've been conducting fair lending and diversity awareness training, some lenders seem to think it doesn't apply to them. Most lenders go to these training sessions because they are mandatory. The fair lending instruction is used to educate the lenders on laws, but how much of the diversity through equal treatment is absorbed? For lenders to really "get it", they should learn more about diverse cultures. Most communities today have very diverse cultural groups living around the banks.

Lenders should have the knowledge and understanding (awareness and empathy), the acceptance (tolerance and respect) and behavior (self-awareness and interpersonal skills) - With all of these understandings, your lenders will create equal treatment and greater potential for increased business and non-discriminatory actions in their professional practices.

By "knocking down the fences," you can effectively manage diversity and establish an organizational structure in which differences are truly valued. This is more than just a good idea- it's good business sense. It is driven by more than a moral imperative, because it brings about an advantage over your competition. Those organizations that meet the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities presented in a diverse workplace will certainly show bottom-line results.

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